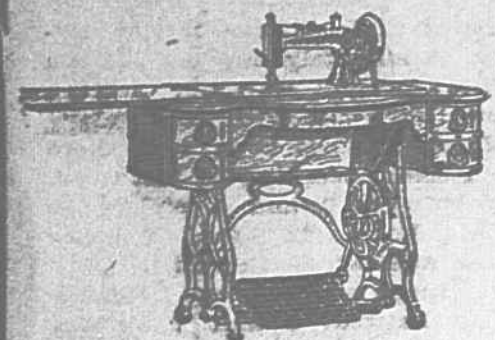


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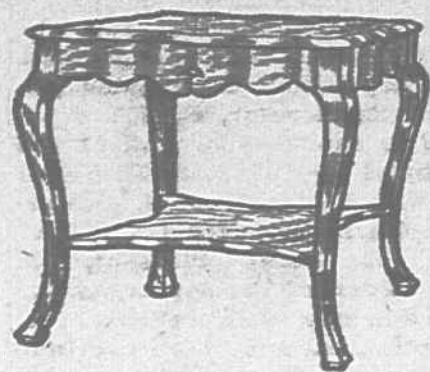
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By Randall Parrish

Author of "When Wilderness Was King"

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARTHUR B. WILLIAMSON

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(Continued from Saturday.)

Through the rising haze of smoke I looked down into angry faces, unkempt beards, and brandished weapons. The baffled rascals poured out upon us from both doors, crowding into the narrow space, cursing, threatening, thirsting for revenge. Yet they were seemingly leaderless, and the boldest among them paused at the foot of the stairs. They had already felt our arms, had tested our steel, and knew well that grim death awaited their advance.

But they could not pause there long—the ever increasing rush of those behind pressed the earlier arrivals steadily forward. Grim necessity furnished a courage naturally lacking, and suddenly, giving vent to a fierce shout, they were hurled upward, seeking to crush us at whatever sacrifice, by sheer force of numbers. We met them with the point, in the good old Roman way, thrusting home remorselessly, fighting with silent contempt for them which must have been mad dening. I even heard Brennan laugh, as he pierced a huge ruffian through the shoulder and hurled him backward, but at that moment I saw Craig knock aside a levelled gun and press his way to the front of the seething mass to assume control. His face was inflamed, his eyes bloodshot; drink had changed him into a very demon.

"Damn ye, Red told you not to fire!" he yelled. "Come on, you dogs! You could eat 'em up if ye wasn't sich blamed cowards. There's only two, and we'll hang them yet."

He leaped straight up the broad steps, his long cavalry sabre in hand, while a dozen of the boldest followed him. Brennan swung his sword high over head, grasping it with both hands for a death-blow, even as I thrust directly at the fellow's throat. The uplifted blade struck the chain of the hanging lamp, snapped at the hilt, and losing his balance the Major plunged headlong into the ruck beneath. The downward fall of his body swept the stairs.

As I stood there, panting and breathless, a woman rushed downward. Believing she would throw herself into that tangled mass below, I instantly caught her to me.

"Don't!" I cried anxiously. "You cannot help him. For God's sake go back where you were."

"It is not that," she exclaimed, her voice thrilling with excitement. "Oh, Captain Wayne, do you not hear the bugles?"

As by magic those hateful faces vanished, disappearing by means of every opening leading out from the hall, and when the cheering blue-coats surged in through the broken door, I was yet standing there, apparently alone but for the dead, leaning weak and breathless against the wall, my arm about Edith Brennan.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

After the Struggle.

A young officer, whose red face was rendered extremely conspicuous by the blue of his uniform, led the rush of his soldiers as they came tumbling gallantly into the hall.

"Up there, men!" he cried, catching sight of me, and pointing. "Get that Johnny with the girl."

As they sprang eagerly forward over the dead bodies littering the floor at the foot of the stairs, Brennan scrambled unsteadily to his feet, and halted them with imperious gesture.

"Leave him alone!" he commanded. "That is the commander of the Confederate detachment who came to our aid. The guerillas have fled down the hallway, and are most of them outside by now. Wayne," he turned and glanced up at us, his face instantly darkening at the tableau, "kindly assist the ladies to descend; we must get them out of this shambles."

He lifted them one by one and with ceremonious politeness across the ghastly pile of dead and wounded men. "Escort them to the library," he suggested, as I hesitated. "That room will probably be found clear."

I was somewhat surprised that Brennan should not have come personally to the aid of his wife, but as he ignored her presence utterly, I at once offered her my arm, and silently led the way to the room designated, the others following as best they might. The apartment was unoccupied, exhibiting no signs of the late struggle, and I found comfortable resting places for all. Miss Minor was yet sobbing softly, her face hidden upon her mother's shoulder, and I felt constrained to speak with her.

"I shall go at once," I said kindly. "To ascertain all I can regarding Lieutenant Caton, and will bring you word."

She thanked me with a glance of her dark eyes clouded with tears, but as I turned hastily away to execute this errand, Mrs. Brennan laid restraining hand upon my arm.

"Captain Wayne," she said with much seriousness, "you are very unselfish, but you must not go until

your own wounds have been attended to; they may be far more serious than you apprehend."

As I gazed at her, surprised by the anxiety she so openly displayed, I chanced to behold myself reflected within a large mirror directly across the room. One glance was sufficient to convince me her words were fully justified. My remains of uniform literally clung to me in rags, my bare shoulder looked a confused mass of battered flesh, my hair was matted, and my face blackened by powder stains and streaked with blood.

"It certainly do appear disreputable enough," I admitted. "But I can assure you it is nothing sufficiently serious to require immediate attention."

As I stepped without and closed the door behind me, I was at once startled by the rapid firing of shot from the rear of the house, and the next moment I encountered the young, red-faced officer hurrying along the hallway at the head of a squad of Federal cavalrymen. Recognizing me in the gloom of the passage he paused suddenly.

"I owe you a belated apology, Captain," he exclaimed cordially, "for having mistaken you for one of those miscreants, but really your appearance was not flattering."

"Having viewed myself since within a mirror," I replied, "I am prepared to acknowledge the mistake a most natural one. However, I am grateful to be out of the scrape, and can scarcely find fault with my rescuers. Five minutes more would have witnessed the end."

"We rode hard," he said, "and were in saddle within fifteen minutes after the arrival of your courier. You evidently made a hard fight of it; the house bears testimony to a terrible struggle. We are rejoiced to learn that Lieutenant Caton was merely stunned; we believed him dead at first, and he is far too fine a fellow to go in that way."

"He is truly living, then?" I exclaimed, greatly relieved. "Miss Minor, to whom he is engaged, is sorrowing over his possible fate in the library yonder. Could not two of your men assist him to her? She would do more to hasten his recovery than any one."

"Certainly," was the instant response. "Haines, you and McDonald get the officer out of the front room; carry him in there where the ladies are, and then rejoin us."

I left, remembering then my own need. By using the back stairway I avoided unpleasant contact with the traces of conflict yet visible at the front of the house, and finally discovered a bathroom which afforded facilities for cleansing my flesh wounds and making my general appearance more presentable. I found I could do little to improve the condition of my clothing, but after making such



A Gentle Hand Was Stroking Back the Hair From Off My Temples.

changes for the better as were possible, soaking the clotted blood from out my hair, and washing the powder stains from my face, I felt I should no longer prove an object of aversion even to the critical eyes of the women, who would fully realize the cause for my torn and begrimed form.

A glance from the window told me the Federal cavalrymen were bearing out the dead and depositing them beyond view of the house in the deserted negro cabins. Ebers and one or two of my own men were standing near, carefully scanning the uncovered faces as they were borne past, while scraps of conversation overheard brought the information that the long dining room where I had passed the night on guard had been converted into a temporary hospital.

Irresolute as to my next action, I passed out into the upper hall. It was deserted and strangely silent, seemingly far removed from all those terrible scenes so lately enacted in the rooms beneath. My head by this time throbbed with pain; I desired to be alone, to think, to map out my future course before proceeding down the stairs to meet the others. With this in view I sank down in complete weariness upon a convenient settee. My heavy head sank back upon the arm of the settee, and deep sleep closed my eyes. It was in my dreams I felt it first—a light, moist touch upon my burning forehead—and I imagined I was a child once more, back at the old home, caressed by the soft hand of my mother. But as consciousness slowly returned I began to realize dimly where I was, and that I was no longer alone. A gentle hand was stroking back the hair from off my temples, while the barest uplift of my eyelids revealed the folds of a dark blue skirt pressing close to my side. Instantly I realized who must be the wearer, and remained motionless until I could better control my first unwise impulse.

(To be continued.)

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